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ABSTRACT

In this paper, Arthur Jefferson, the Executive Director of the Office of Criminal Justice Plans and Analysis, discusses crime in the black community and its effect on the black family. The literature on the impact of crime on the black family is not extensive; however, there is considerable information concerning crime in the black community in urban areas. This data is disturbing. Some of it suggests that crime contributes to the social disorganization of the poor black urban community. Juvenile crime in the black community threatens the security of black families and involves a large number of black youth in a justice system that seems to be incapable of treating their problems. A new development in juvenile crime has been the recent growth of gang related crime. Urban ghetto youth seem to use the gang structure to become an economic and social force in their communities through acts of extortion and violence. The single greatest cause of crime in black communities is unemployment. It is noted that crime will not diminish in the black community until unemployment diminishes. It is also argued that minority communities will not get a handle on their crime difficulties until those communities become mobilized to prevent crime. (Author/AM)

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NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE CONFERENCE

ON

BLACK FAMILIES: A SOURCE OF NATIONAL STRENGTH

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I would like to thank Mr. Jordan and Professor Billingsley for inviting me to share with you my thoughts and information on crime in the Black community and its effect on the Black family.

Initially, I should caution you that I come to this subject matter as neither a sociologist or a person with a great amount of research background in this area.

I am the Executive Director of the Office of Criminal Justice Plans and Analysis, which is an agency of the District of Columbia Government. OCJP&A serves at least two functions within the D. C. Government. First, we serve as the LEAA State Planning Agency for the District. Secondly, we serve as the office of criminal justice statistical analysis for D. C.

In May 1977, I was named to my current post and came to this job with a clear prejudice towards the idea that the most effective way that persons engaged in seeking to deal with crime in urban areas should proceed would be to mobilize communities in the effort. Urban Black folk know that we have a serious crime problem in our neighborhoods and increasingly we are becoming more willing to take community action to protect ourselves and our property from the criminals within our communities. In defining this "criminal element" I am referring to persons who are generally engaged in the crimes of burglary, robbery, rape, larceny, assault and homicide.

I am not referring to "white collar" crime, although I insist that to deal with one type of crime while ignoring the other often overlooks an important criminal element within our society. A poll

conducted by the Washington Urban League in 1976 to examine the priorities and problems of low income area residents indicated that crime in the community ranks among the top three concerns of District residents.

The literature concerning the impact of crime on the Black family is not extensive. Most researchers mention crime in relation to the family as one of many factors contributing to the social disorganization of the poor black urban communities. However, there is considerable information available on crime in the Black community, in urban areas, and this data is most disturbing.

A 1976 National Urban League document pointed out that nationally Black Americans were four times as likely to be robbed as whites, twice as likely to be assaulted and four times as likely to be raped.

The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice reported that in Chicago in 1967, a Black man was six times more likely than a white man to be a victim of crime and that a Black woman was almost 8 times as likely as a white woman to be a victim of such crime.

The burden of crime in our society clearly falls on the poor and minorities in low income urban areas. In general, victimization rates tend to decline as one moves outward from central cities to rural areas. This tendency is pronounced for violent crimes against the person, which

seems to show a central city rate five times as great as that of small cities and rural areas. (Property crimes show a rate only twice as great.)

A recent study done by LEAA on criminal victimization in the District of Columbia indicates that in my jurisdiction whites, particularly young white males, are more likely to be the victims of crimes of violence than Blacks. This study goes on to point out that 52% of household crimes (burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft) resulted in losses valued at $50 or more. However, Black households sustained a higher proportion of losses in the $50 or more range than did whites.

Among those households that were victimized by burglary, Blacks recovered insurance compensation proportionately less often than white households. For burlgary, 60% of the white households but only 38% of the Black/other households made such a recovery.

If your family has ever been a victim of a household burglary, you can attest to the fact that no crime seems to disturb a family's domestic tranquility as does this crime.

Juvenile crime in the Black community not only threatens the security of black families, but also involves a disproportionate number of Black youngsters in a juvenile justice system that seems to be incapable of treating their problems.

In the District of Columbia in 1976, arrests of juveniles (persons under 18 years of age) constituted 29.5 percent of total Part I arrests, 97% of these juveniles were Black as against a general population in which 87% of all juveniles are Black.

One should note that Part I crimes include criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and motor vehicle theft.

When the data was broken down by my planning staff the results indicated that juveniles were arrested for 25.7 percent of person crimes and 32.2 percent of property crimes. Within the category titled "person crimes" juveniles were arrested for 36.5 percent of all robberies but only 9.2 percent of all murders. In the property crime category, juveniles were arrested for 46.9 percent of all burglaries and 24.9 percent of larceny-thefts.

An increasingly disturbing development in juvenile crime activities has been the recent growth in the number of Black and Spanish surnamed youth participating in violent youth gang activities. My conversations with leaders of youth gangs and adults who have successfully steered youth gangs away from violent criminal conduct towards constructive outlets indicates that most of these gangs form because (1) youth seek peer group camaraderie and (2) a need for protection from other youth. In the environment of very high youth unemployment coupled with economic deprivation that characterizes our

urban ghettos these youth use the gang structure to become an economic and social force in their communities through acts of extortion and violence.

What is most disturbing is that our current juvenile justice system is unable to effectively turn these juvenile offenders away from criminal conduct directed towards the Black community. Some community groups have had success in this effort but all too often they find themselves unable to obtain adequate funds and/or in conflict with local law enforcement and government.

This brings me to what I know is the single greatest cause of crime in Black communities. This is the massive level of unemployment and underemployment facing our youth and adults. Being out of work is a personal tragedy for the unemployed individual and his or her family. It also is a very real crisis for the community in which the person and family live.

Some solutions to Black communities' unemployment are expanded enforcement of affirmative action programs, good skills training programs and a more effective public education system for urban Black communities. However, without an adequate number of jobs in an expanding job market, for youth especially, it is not unreasonable to expect that those persons with marginal employment skills will be attracted to crime and an adequate number of jobs is exactly the commodity which is currently in short supply in our major cities.

For instance, in Washington, D. C., since 1970 the city's growth rate has only advanced at an annual rate of approximately 0.2% per year. Since 1970 the number of jobs in the private sector has remained virtually the same with only a 9% growth rate in government employment preventing a severe consequence.

Jobs have been shifting away from our Nation's Capitol, like other inner cities, to Suburban areas. Seven years ago, 48% of the regional jobs were in the city. Last year only 42% were there.

Figures developed by my office and other D. C. agencies clearly indicate, to me, that there is a relationship between unemployment and crime.

For instance, at a time in which the overall unemployment rate for the City of Washington was 7.6% the rate of unemployment among persons arrested for serious misdemeanors and felonies in the District was 46% (6 times greater than the average). 43% of the Black males arrested were unemployed as compared with 28% of the non-Black males. Among persons arrested Black females had the highest unemployment rate (66%) and those Black women arrested who had jobs typically held low income, unskilled jobs.

These studies show that 46% of the persons arrested indicated that they were employed at the time of arrest but among this group 50% earned less than $3 per hour. Better than 60% of these employed persons were working in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, the largest number working in

job classifications categorized as "Service Workers" (21.3%) and "laborers" (19.6%). These two occupational categories, for the most part unskilled, account for forty (40%) of the employed pre-trial population.

Information developed by the District Government also demonstrates that in the categories of serious felony crimes, where economic gain may be an incentive (e.g., larceny, robbery and burglary), the proportion of those unemployed is significantly higher than for other types of offenses. Fifty percent (50%) of all persons arrested for robbery were unemployed, fifty-three percent (53%) of burglary arrestees were unemployed as were forty-nine percent (49%) of larceny suspects.

Nationally, the U. S. Department of Labor estimates that 35.6% of Black teenagers were defined as jobless during the last quarter of 1976, as compared to 16.7% of white teenagers. However, according to a March 1977 report by the National Urban League's Research Department, which seeks to speak to actual unemployment levels within Black communities nationwide/teenage Black unemployment during the fourth quarter of 1976 soared from 52.3% to 58.3%.

Labor Department figures for 1976 for the District of Columbia indicated that while the overall unemployment rate was 9.1% the teenage unemployment rate was 32.9%. The highest incidence of unemployment was among non-white teenage males, who had a rate of 35%.

In such an environment of economic deprivation which causes high incidences of crimes against individuals and households, one could expect that many Black families are experiencing new and greater challenges to their survival. And they are.

Homicides within Black families are more likely to occur where the families income is low. Homicides and assaults committed by poor blacks in the family is the second most frequently reported setting for these crimes nationally. Seventeen percent of the reported all black assaults, in one study, occurred between legal or common-law husbands and wives. Conflict between husband and wife frequently results from economic pressures. The wife, who frequently is employed, criticizes the husband's economic performance and his spending patterns in terms of supporting his lifestyle. The husband responds with violence.

Alcohol or drugs also often cause both stress within Black families as well as create potential parasites which prey on the family. As noted earlier, the Washington, D. C. study showed that Black families are the most likely to be burglarized and the least likely to be insured. Such a climate in which criminal acts put more economic pressure on the already economically disadvantaged further threaten the family.

The solutions to the crippling effect that crime is having on the Black family are many, but, in conclusion I would like to offer two suggestions.

First of all it is clear to me that crime in the Black community will not diminish until unemployment in Black communities is severely diminished. This is particularly true among teenagers who are currently experiencing the greatest levels of unemployment in our communities. Studies in D. C. have shown that during the summer, when public service employment is available to juveniles, the incidences of juveniles involved in criminal activities is substantially lower than the rest of the year.

Secondly, I would argue that minority communities will not get a handle on their crime difficulties until those communities become mobilized to prevent crime. Community crime prevention programs in various cities have shown that communities can effectively mobilize to deal with their crime problems.

In Portland, Oregon, the Portland Development Commission, an agency of this city government, has involved community groups and residents of the Union Avenue Area in a successful program to reduce street crime and the citizen's fear of being victimized.

In Minneapolis a number of community organizations have come together to advise city agencies on how crime and fear of crime can be lowered in their neighborhoods. This program is especially interesting since the community organizations themselves (including the Minneapolis Urban League) were the moving force behind this successful community crime prevention program.

Both of these programs, although community based are funded through Federal LEAA funds and I would argue that they represent the direction that Federal crime control efforts should point in the future.

As I have already stated the two suggested approaches to dealing with crime in our Black communities are not exhaustive. However, they do offer a real hope to communities that are now being torn apart largely from the inside.